**"Breaking Down an Image"** was written by Jenna Pack on the website *Writing Commons*.

We come across many images on a daily basis, but we rarely stop to think about what those images mean or about how they persuade us. Yet, images have power, which is why we need to understand how to analyze them. When you’re analyzing an image to understand the message it portrays, this is called *visual rhetoric*. *Visual rhetoric is a means of communication that uses images to create meaning or to make an argument*.

The first thing to consider when breaking down, or analyzing, an image is the *rhetorical situation*: the *audience*, *context*, and *purpose. Tone* is another important analytical tool*.* Each of these elements is essential in order to understand the message an image portrays. It is important to remember that you can analyze all different types of images, including advertisements, Public Service Announcements (PSAs), websites, paintings, photographs, and more. Here, we will look at a watch advertisement:

Audience

The *audience* consists of who is being targeted by the author, designer, or creator. In the above image, it appears that the audience is men. How do we know this? Not only is the person running in the background a man, but the color of the watch and the size of the watch face indicate that the watch is likely a man’s watch. Of course, women could indirectly be an audience, too, since they might want to buy this watch for someone or wear it themselves. In addition, the audience might be male *athletes* or outdoor *enthusiasts*. If you pay close attention to the watch features, it includes North, South, East, and West orientations; it is digital with various modes that likely include a stopwatch, and it has a light for when it is dark. All of these features are likely to appeal to outdoors types, athletes, or both.

Context

The *context* includes any background information that will help you understand and analyze an image. In the above image, the most important context is that the watch is a Pro Trek watch. If you did some research, you would find out that Pro Trek watches are part of Casio, an electronics manufacturing company. Knowing that Casio is an electronics company, we might assume that they value functionality over aesthetics; therefore, this might be the reason why the above watch is not very decorative or complex, but is still the focal point of the image. This is because Casio wants to feature the watch’s functionality.

Purpose

*Purpose* refers to the overall goal for creating an image. With advertisements, that goal is fairly easy to understand. Advertisements are almost always made to sell items. In our example image, the purpose is to sell the Pro Trek watch.

There are many other strategies to consider when breaking down an image. It’s always important to consider the rhetorical situation first, since that will help you interpret the purpose of the other strategies the designer uses. Then, you can begin to interpret the other persuasive techniques that influence the overall message of the image, including the tone, arrangement, text, typography, and color.

Tone

In literature, *tone* refers to the author’s attitude toward the subject. So, with regard to images, tone can also refer to the photographer/artist’s/designer’s perspective on the issue. In our image above, the tone is a bit hard to interpret. However, the fact that the watch is focused and up close while the background image of a person is blurred gives us a clue: it seems that the designer is portraying that the wearer of the watch is not that important. The watch is what’s significant. Perhaps the message is that anyone can wear these watches. Whether or not this is an effective approach to selling the watch is up for debate!